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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANILA 000238

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PTER](#) [RP](#)

SUBJECT: INTERIOR SECRETARY PLEDGES CONTINUED COOPERATION

Classified By: (U) Ambassador Kristie A. Kenney for reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary. In a January 19 meeting, the Ambassador thanked Interior Secretary Puno for his role in the transfer of LCpl Smith back to the Embassy, commended his Department for preparing a draft Executive Order on police/prosecutor cooperation, and stressed the need to implement the Philippine National Police transformation program. Puno highlighted the importance of honoring international agreements as the key factor in the decision to transfer LCpl Smith to U.S. custody, pledged to continue to push for the signing of the Executive Order and for passage of anti-terrorism legislation, and defended his Department's removal of local government officials for corruption. End Summary.

¶2. (C) The Ambassador met over breakfast on January 19 with Secretary of the Interior and Local Government Rolando V.

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Puno. The Ambassador thanked Secretary Puno for the Administration's courageous decision to transfer LCpl. Daniel Smith to U.S. custody in December and for the effective manner in which the transfer was made, with special praise for the close coordination of U/S Corps. Secretary Puno explained that he had been one of few Presidential advisers who believed the Administration, rather than the courts, should take the lead on the Smith case, as the executive branch has the responsibility for upholding international agreements. According to Puno, leaving interpretation of the Visiting Forces Agreement to the judicial branch would yield different interpretations by different courts. Puno said he had successfully argued to President Arroyo that, ultimately, the international credibility of the Philippines to honor agreements was at stake. Puno was complimentary of the Embassy's "professionalism" in handling the case.

¶3. (C) The Ambassador emphasized the importance of improving police/prosecutor cooperation in successfully investigating and prosecuting cases of terrorism, extrajudicial killings, and trafficking in persons, and commended his role in preparing a draft Executive Order on such cooperation, which remains at Malacanang for signature by the President. Puno pledged to push for its signing soon. The Ambassador noted that the ongoing Philippine National Police (PNP) transformation program would also play a key role in improving investigations, and assured continued support for the program through the Embassy's Senior Law Enforcement Advisor.

¶4. (C) Puno characterized the passage of a pending anti-terrorism bill as "absolutely necessary" in the war on terrorism. He said it was "outrageous" that known terrorists could be free on bail because of the absence of an effective

anti-terrorism law. He promised to work to ensure that the Senate would pass its version this year. (The House passed another version in 2006.)

15. (C) Puno noted the success of the PNP Task Force Usig, created to investigate extrajudicial killings, in bringing transparency to a very difficult and contentious issue. According to Puno, while left-leaning activist groups claimed that there have been hundreds of cases involving security forces, Task Force Usig has thus far identified only seven cases involving the police. The PNP has filed charges against several police officers; some are in custody, while some are on the run. Puno said he was working with Philippine Ambassador to the U.S. Gaa to help better explain the issue to policy makers in Washington.

16. (C) Puno defended the recent removal by his Department of various local government officials accused of graft and corruption. While the press had reported that the Administration was targeting opposition officials in an effort to influence the May 2007 elections, Puno stated that only one of the nine local government officials removed belonged to the opposition (others, such as the Mayor of Zamboanga, tell us differently). Puno added that it was the Ombudsman, an independent body charged with investigating and prosecuting corruption by government officials, rather than his Department, that had selected these officials; DILG merely complied with the Ombudsman's order.

17. (C) Secretary Puno labeled the recent ASEAN summit a success, highlighting the lack of violence as an indication that the DILG had effectively handled demonstrators. He attributed this success to increased DILG contact with the Commission on Human Rights and to improved human rights training for police.

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